The Fourteenth Autumn

Aincrad Floor 35, October 4th, 2024

Kunori Fumio

"Kirito-san, congratulations on clearing Floor 73!" announced Silica, holding up her wine glass. The black-haired swordsman touched his glass to hers looking slightly embarrassed as he did so.

Clink, a crisp echo rang out and a small, blue dragon gave a high-pitched cry, "Kyuru!" from her place on the table. The sound caused by the glasses may have triggered the response, but Pina somehow looked happy, too.

Taking a sip of the light-pink wine, Kirito carefully raised his glass again. "Thank you, Silica. Though...I barely had any action this time."

"...Really? Is that true?"

"Yeah. The boss was one of those «Giant and Solid» types. In theory, something like that takes a coordinated attack by a lot of people, so the major guilds like KoB or DDA went up against the boss while I cleaned up the underlings the entire time," said Kirito, who laughed like he couldn't care less about it, but Silica pursed her lips in his stead.

"I don't quite get it. Shouldn't the whole party handle the boss and the minions while rotating players?"

"Nah, that would've made the operation more complicated... But I do feel kinda bad that I didn't have a chance to take the LA." Kirito chuckled lightly and blinked a few times, then stared straight at Silica. She subconsciously hid her mouth behind her wine glass and peered back up at him.

"W-What is it?"

"Nothing... I was just thinking how time flies and you're even using words like «minions» and «rotating» now..."

"T-That's normal! How many years do you think we've been here?!" Silica shot back and gulped down her drink to conceal her burning cheeks.

No matter how many liters of alcohol were consumed in this world, the player's real body would never ingest a single drop. The player could still get a little light in the head though when the wine-flavored liquid was downed in one shot, like it was more sour than sweet.

This day was October 4th, 2024. It had been one year and eleven months since the start of the Death Game «Sword Art Online», so the "how many years" line from Silica was a slight exaggeration, but it really did feel like many years had passed. She was completely used to life in the steel floating castle with its day-to-day adventures—even mastering various MMORPG terminologies—but her level still fell short of Kirito's and the clearers'.

So opportunities for Silica to see Kirito were typically scarce. The reason they were meeting in the NPC restaurant on the first floor of the inn «Weathercock Pavilion» in the town square of Mieche on Floor 35 was because she had summoned him under the pretext of treating him to a celebration for clearing Floor 73.

Silica had used the same «ruse» several times before, but the feelings hidden in her heart were just a little more special today. Of course, she didn't plan on confessing this or anything at all. Far from it, Silica had no intention of telling him why today was special to her. She was content with being able to spend just a few hours together with Kirito during the early evening.

Kirito set his glass down on the table. He lifted the bottle and refilled it with the pink liquid. Even a gesture as simple as that made Silica's virtual heart skip a beat. Convincing herself to act normally, *just normally*, she returned to conversation.

"...If the Floor 73 boss was the «Giant and Solid» type, then the Floor 74 boss has gotta be the «Tiny and Cuddly» type. You're going to get lots of action next time!"

"Hmm, those bosses are a massive pain in the butt to fight...so I don't really want to take them on." Kirito gave a faint, wry smile at Silica's words, then poked at the nut tart on the table with his fork. The cake tart with a fluffy crust, that was loaded with a cheese mousse and tons of nuts, seemed like it would've been all but impossible to eat neatly in the real world. In this world however, it was sliced into perfect proportions with just a light stab of his fork. The crust didn't fall apart, nor did any nuts fall out. Kirito started to bring a bite-sized piece of the tart to his mouth when—

Pina, who had been quiet the entire time on the table, stretched her long neck toward Kirito and crooned, "Kyuru?" She looked as if she was begging for cake...and she wasn't making any other motion.

"H-Hey, Pina, that's bad manners!" Silica hurriedly reached toward her pet dragon, not unlike a pet dog. However, Pina slipped freely through her hands and kept looking straight up at Kirito's face with her beady eyes.

By principle, pets in SAO—officially, Tamed Monsters—would only eat when personally fed by their owners. Even when they found their favorite nuts or bugs while in the Field, they would ignore them. Since pets didn't complain directly when they were hungry, the hidden parameter for affinity would fall if the owner forgot to feed a pet for a prolonged period of time, leading to the abrupt termination of the Tamed status and the ex-pet would flee. In the worst case scenario, they would even attack their former owners.

Silica always kept Pina's favorite nuts in her waist pouch and even wore a timer earring on her right ear, so she never forgot to feed Pina regularly. She had even faithfully fed Pina before entering the restaurant, so she shouldn't have gotten hungry for another hour and half... No, even in this case, Pina absolutely shouldn't show interest in the human cuisine that another player was eating, even if it was a nut tart chock-full of her beloved nuts.

Thinking of something along those lines in a corner of her mind, Silica tried to pick up Pina. "Geez, I said no..."

However, she was held back by Kirito's hand inches away from Pina. The black-haired swordsman smiled faintly and moved his fork in front of Pina. The small dragon instantly sank her teeth into a piece of the nut tart and blissfully munched on it.

"Ohh... Pina, you..." Silica bowed her head and apologized for her pet. "I'm sorry, Kirito-san. Her manners usually aren't this bad..."

"You don't need to apologize. In the real world, I'd get chewed out instead for giving treats to someone else's pet without permission."

"Hahah, that's true...but that's not the problem. I'll ban her from the table from now on!" Silica declared firmly, reaching out again to put Pina down on the floor before she could ask for seconds.

But what nerve. The small, blue dragon nimbly dodged her master's hands and took flight from the table, flying a small circuit before landing on a head.

Not Silica's but Kirito's.

"Ah, augh! I-I'm so sorry..." Silica bolted upright and threw out her hands, but the table was too wide and she couldn't reach.

In the meantime, Pina folded her wings, beneath which she tucked her head after wrapping her neck around herself, and assumed a sleeping position. Before the speechless Silica's very eyes, she was fast asleep, breathing peacefully with a "kyururu...spee..."

"~~~~~~!!" Uttering a muted growl at her pet for the terrible misbehavior, Silica tried to circle around the table, but Kirito stopped her again with a single raised hand.

"It's okay. Let her sleep."

"B-But that's not..."

"I'm fine with it. She's not heavy at all, and my head's all warm."

"...I'm really sorry..."

Silica hesitated about plucking Pina regardless from Kirito's head despite being told otherwise, but she forced herself to sit back down. She quickly glanced around the eatery. Luckily, there weren't any other players. It was still a little early for dinner; «The Bewildering Woods» on Floor 35 that had once been popular with mid-level players half a year ago had become deserted as of late with the successive discoveries of more efficient leveling grounds.

When Silica looked forward again, Kirito was nonchalantly stuffing his face with the nut tart while Pina rested atop his head. Spurred on by him, Silica also lightly jabbed into the cheesecake that had been placed in front of her. It responded with a *plop* as a light-yellow piece was sliced off, which Silica then brought to her mouth as mannerly as she could. A sweet, rich, and refreshing taste radiated through her.

Silica was especially fond of «Weathercock Pavilion»'s baked cheesecake and while she was leveling regularly in The Bewildering Woods she had it almost daily, but now she was ordering it only when there was something special, because—

"...This sure brings back memories," Kirito mumbled quietly, across from her. He continued to gaze out the window steeped in sunset hues. "I think we toasted with the wine that I had brought back then, didn't we? ...Has it been half a year already...?"

"It really has been... Your wine was delicious. It raised my AGI as well."

Hearing those words, Kirito looked back at her and grinned. "The drop rate for that wine has been patched and you really can't get it anymore. If you're thinking of having some now, a single glass of it is like 1,000,000[1] col."

"Wha..." Silica reflexively covered her mouth with a hand. If she had 1,000,000 col, she could afford a fairly spacious place in the neighborhood of «Mieche». For a moment, she almost imagined 100,000 col in gold jingling in her stomach, but she promptly perished the thought. "...To me, what happened on that day is a precious memory that not even all of the col in Aincrad can buy. One mega col can't shake me!"

"Hahah, really? ...Yeah, I guess so... To me as well..."

The swordsman paused and looked out the window again. No matter how much his head bobbed, Pina showed no sign of waking up. She appeared as relaxed as when she slept by Silica's side at night, still snoozing with a "kyururu...kyururu..."

"Maybe..." whispered Silica, but only Kirito's gaze shifted to her briefly. Staring into his pitch-black eyes, she repeated, "Maybe Pina remembers that you're the one who brought her back to life, Kirito-san."

"Really...?"

"I'm sure she does. That's why I love you."

The words tumbled out naturally. In the three whole seconds it took for Silica to recognize what she had said, her hands thrust out in front of her and waved wildly as she cried, "Oh, n-no! For Pina! Pina! I didn't mean anything else!"

"...Uh, okay."

Seeing how speechless Kirito looked, Silica realized that her reaction had been over the top. She flailed again, screaming shrilly—

"Oh, f-forget what I just said! Forget it!"

—But was that the best idea? By retracting the statement that it was Pina who loved Kirito, the subject inevitably had to be someone else and the only candidates in this place were Silica and the NPC waiter. If only it was a waitress, then there might've been some room to construe it...

Silica was incredibly flustered, her embarrassment magnified. She was ruining this «Special Day» and she felt so miserable that tears started to pool in her eyes, when—

Kirito suddenly raised his right hand and flicked down. A menu window opened, accompanied by a ringing sound. As Silica watched, caught off-guard her thinking abruptly halted, his slender fingertip fluidly navigated the screen and a single object materialized in no time flat.

A small, white box fell into Kirito's palm from the closed window with a soft *fwump*. A blue ribbon criss-crossed its opaque exterior.

With the box in his right hand, Kirito smiled, "It's late, but here's the answer to your quiz."

"...It is...? I gave you...a quiz...?" she asked, stunned.

The swordsman looked somewhat taken back and answered, "You did. The last time we met, when I asked about where your character name came from..."

"Huh... Oh...!" Silica's hands flew to her mouth and her eyes opened wide. She recalled that they did have such a conversation when she had a meal with him last month under the excuse of a celebratory party for clearing Floor 70.

The name 'Silica' was based on her name in the real world, so its origin wasn't quite something to keep secret. Rather, she felt strangely embarrassed about its lack of substance, so she turned the answer into a riddle: "My real name comes after Arumi but before Rin."

At the time, Kirito looked baffled, like "what was that?" but apparently he had arrived at some sort of an answer after a month. However, why didn't he say it but present a box? Could the answer have been written on a slip of paper inside it?

With Pina still sound asleep on his head, Kirito skillfully spun the box on a fingertip. "Well, actually, I should've caught on when I heard Arumi and Rin. I was thinking that Rin was a girls' name...and Arumi could be spelled like 有美-chan or 亜瑠魅-chan... So I put a lot of thought into what name would come between the two."

Silica burst out laughing at the unexpected reply. "Hahahah... I did have a real friend named Rin-chan, but I've never, ever, had anyone named Arumi-chan."

"I wouldn't know that. My dad really liked that name... But that's not the point." He returned the small box atop his finger to his hand and heaved a sigh. "It took me a week to realize that Rin and Arumi weren't girls' names. Arumi was short for aluminum and Rin was the phosphorus used in matches[2]...and what comes between them, to put it simply, is on the periodic table."

"Yes, you're on the right track!" Silica clapped lightly. She clasped her hands together and brought them up to her mouth. "...So, do you know what comes between them?"

"Of course. ...Or that's what I want to say, but all I could remember was «Happy Henry Likes Beer But Can Not Obtain Four Newts»...so I asked an acquaintance about what comes after that: sodium, magnesium, aluminum, silicon, phosphorus. So what comes between them is silicon. In Japanese, it's called *keiso*. When bonded with two oxygen atoms, it becomes oxidized, which is...silica."

"Oh yes, that's right!" Silica clapped again, but she still didn't understand why Kirito produced a small box from storage. As if she was the one being quizzed now, she waited for Kirito to continue.

"So I think your real name has something to do with silicon, possibly by containing the character for «kei»... Though I won't follow up on that," smiling broadly, he leaned his head as

forward as he could without dropping Pina. "By the way, why is your character name «Silica», and not something like «Silico»?"

"Oh, that's just because...Silico doesn't sound too cute..." She giggled and tugged at the red ribbons tying her hair to the sides of her head. "And now I get to have oxygen...two O atoms bonded right here."

"Whoa... I see, so those ring baubles are supposed to be O_2. They make SiO_2 with silicon... I see why you're called Silica. ...Anyhow, I've solved the quiz you gave me. Now I'm curious why your parents used the character «kei» in their kid's name..."

"Oh... Normally, you'd use the «kei» without a radical or the «kei» with the person radical," remarked Silica, thinking that he didn't know why, just as she expected. However, since it was Kirito who she was talking to— No, because it was Kirito, that was the only thing she couldn't tell him. It was directly linked to the secret lying in her heart today.

However, Kirito placed the small box on the table and grinned knowingly again. "I started to wonder about it when I got the message from you. It's rare for you to specify a meeting date, isn't it? You wrote, "on October 4th," but before this, you've always written "tomorrow" or "the day after tomorrow."

"Huh... O-Oh, really?"

"Really. That's when I wondered... —So anyways, umm...Happy Birthday, Silica." With those words, Kirito slid the small, blue-ribboned box right in front of Silica.

She stiffened for a full five seconds, then—

"Whaaaaaa?!" Silica jumped up from her seat while screaming at the top of her lungs.

Immediately, Pina perked up from Kirito's head and hastily scanned around. Confirming the absence of monsters, she let out a great, lazy yawn, took off from Kirito's head, and settled at her usual spot, Silica's left shoulder.

As if squashed by the weight of the small dragon, Silica slumped back into her chair and whispered, stupefied, "U-Um, why...?"

"Oh, am I right, given that reaction?

"Uh, y-yes, you are... But how...?" she asked again, forgetting to even thank him. The «special» reason that she'd planned to keep secret forever was thwarted just like that.

Relieved, Kirito unclenched his jaw and ruffled his flattened black hair. "Thank goodness, I was wondering what I'd do if I got it wrong. The reason why that character «kei» is used in your name is because your birthday's on October 4th...right? Because together, they make 14...the atomic number of silicon. Maybe your mom or dad is a chemist?"

Still in a state of shock, Silica answered reflexively, "Oh... Um, my grandfather is the chemist. And he named his child...my dad; he was born on February 6th, so he named him «Tetsuhiko» after iron[3], which has the atomic number of 26... My dad is really into arts and literature, but I think he wanted to carry on the naming trend, so when I was born on October 4th, he tried to name me after atomic number 104."

"Erk, 104...? What element is that...?"

"It's «Rutherfordium». But no matter what he tried, he couldn't get a girls' name out of it...so he resorted to adding 10 and 4 together to make 14 and came up with the name «Keiko» from silicon..." She knew she had revealed her real name after going into so much detail, but with her birthday disclosed as well, she no longer thought of it as a big deal. Silica withdrew herself, as if hiding behind the wings of Pina on her shoulder, and she continued, "...So, um...I'm sorry, Kirito-san, for calling you here without telling you it's my birthday..."

"N-No, please, don't apologize." Seeing Silica getting further depressed, Kirito hurriedly waved it off. "Uh, um, there's like a taboo around bringing up the topic of the real world here in Aincrad... So I understand how you felt like you couldn't say it's your birthday...and I should be the one apologizing, for prying into your real name and birthday..."

"N-Not at all! I'm actually glad!" Now Silica was waving. If she was the one who had summoned him for her birthday, then she should be the one to reveal her real name. There was nothing for Kirito to apologize about.

Her downcast eyes caught the sight of the small, white box. She glanced at it for a moment, then looked up with a jerk. "Er...um...s-so, is this box...is it, uh, f-for m-...?!"

As if rattled by Silica's outburst, Kirito pulled back somewhat and nodded with a wry smile. "It'd be cruel of me to say that it wasn't a birthday present for you now. ...Though I didn't have any time to prepare something big, so please don't get your hopes up too much."

"W-W-W-Why would I? I'd be happy with anything from you. Um, may I please open it?"

Kirito had barely nodded his approval before Silica picked up the box from the table with both of her hands.

If this was the real world, then she'd be eagerly untying the ribbon, but unfortunately she couldn't experience the process in this world. She tapped the box with her fingertip and selected «Open» on the displayed pop-up screen, after which the box auto-unlocked and disappeared.

Into Silica's palm, down fell—

A thin ring shining in gold.

So startled that she couldn't even cry, "Whaaaaaa—?!" Silica was completely frozen.

There were four types of accessory items in SAO: earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Kirito could've picked any one of them, but he dared to pick a ring because it meant that...it meant that—?

With the beautiful ring designed like an angel's wings in her hand, Silica looked up nervously.

Their eyes met. The black-haired swordsman gave a small smile as he slowly nodded, "That's the reward item for the «Angel's Ring» quest, which showed up recently. Its proper name is «Ring of Angel's Whisper». It doesn't really raise stats, but it does have a pretty powerful magic ability..."

"...Magic...ability?"

"Yep. It can send voice messages to registered players once a month. You know, Silica, don't you send me messages about that often? It must be tough for you to think of what to write each time, so you can use that ring like a cellphone from now on."

"...Like a...cellphone?" She eyed the ring in her hand again.

—In other words, this ring had never had an underlying meaning... It was only meant to be a convenient way to communicate...

"...Umm..." Lost for a moment on how to react, Silica took a deep breath, then broke into a smile. "...Thank you very much, Kirito-san. I'm so happy!" She gently held the ring with her right hand and equipped it on her left hand's ring... —nope, index finger.

No matter the connotations, it didn't change the fact that she was able to receive a ring from someone whom she loves on her birthday. It'd be too greedy to ask for anything more.

The current front line was Floor 74. The clearing of the floating castle was no more than three-quarters complete. The estimated time for reaching the highest floor was another year and Silica's secret goal was to join the clearers there.

—*I'll never miss a month contacting him with this ring until that day.* Making up her mind, a pure joy, after some time lag, spread through Silica's body from the depths of her heart. A wide grin lit up her face once more and she uttered, "Daddy said that my fourteenth October 4th would be a special birthday. And it's true!"

On her shoulder, perhaps Pina sensed her master's emotions, as she also spread her wings wide and happily cooed, "Kyuruururuu!"

However, in the end, Silica never sent her voice to Kirito with «Angel's Ring».

Approximately one month after her birthday, on November 7th, Sword Art Online was cleared with 25 floors remaining.

The steel floating castle collapsed and resurfaced about half a year later in the skies of another world. With the new Aincrad as the setting, this time Silica took on the challenge to obtain «Angel's Ring» through her own power—

But that's another story.

«Fin»

References

1. ↑ Pronounced as 'one mega'
2. ↑ Rin is Japanese for phosphorus
3. ↑ Testu is Japanese for iron